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ABSTRACT

This paper considers many aspects of children's response to literature. Among the topics discussed are factors within the child (related to age, sex, and intelligence) that teachers and researchers agree may affect a child's enjoyment of literature; a research study on the relationship between story content and a child's psychological and developmental needs; books with animal characters; realistic picture storybooks for children in kindergarten and first grade; realistic and fantasy stories that may be read aloud to somewhat older children; books that may be read aloud to fifth and sixth graders; science fiction and realistic fiction for fifth and sixth graders; aspects of literature (content, form, and literary quality) that may affect response; and elements of the environment (the teacher's own enjoyment of literature, the classroom situation, teaching methods, and parental influence) that affect a child's response to literature. The paper recommends numerous children's books that may be used in a literature program. (GW)

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CHILDREN'S RESPONSE TO LITERATURE

A Paper

Presented at the

Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association

Far West Regional Conference

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CHILDREN'S RESPONSE TO LITERATURE

The teacher is an important factor in children's response to literature (Norvell, 1973). The influence a teacher has on a child's enjoyment and appreciation of literature may be life-long. Many of us here today, I am sure, can remember teachers who, by their own pleasure in reading aloud to us, left us with an enduring love of literature.

But our concern today is not with our own interest in literature but with ways to interest our students in the richness and variety of literature available to them. We want to elicit a positive response to literature from our students. We want them to enjoy the stories and poems we've selected to share with them in the classroom, and we want them to go to the library to seek out good books for their independent reading. The problem is to achieve these commendable but elusive goals.

Research studies have isolated certain factors that affect a child's response to literature. For the most part, these studies support observations of teachers and librarians working with children. This is not surprising because the perceptive teacher or librarian, though perhaps unconsciously, proceeds from the same premise as the researcher in observing student behavior. Both the teacher and the researcher presume that factors such as sex, age, and type of story affect a child's response to literature. The difference between teacher observation and a research study is a matter of method. The teacher is

quite informal in testing his premise against the behavior he observes in his students over a period of time. The researcher designs a formal procedure to test his hypothesis, usually in a rather brief span of time. The conclusions that the teacher draws from his observations are often similar to those the researcher draws from his data.

What are the factors that both teachers and researchers agree may affect a child's enjoyment of literature? First, there are the factors inherent within the child: sex, age, and intelligence. Then there are the factors within the literature: content, form, and literary quality. There are also the factors within the environment: method of teacher presentation; the teacher's own enjoyment of literature; peer pressure; parental influence. Finally, and difficult to access, is the interaction of these factors.

Let us look first at the factors inherent within the child. Sex has little influence on the very young child's preferences in picture storybooks, folk tales, or poetry, but beginning at about age seven, sex becomes an important factor. Already for second graders, we have "boys' stories" and "girls' stories." How much of this is cultural conditioning, we do not know. Whatever the reason, teachers and researchers agree that certain types of stories are favored by boys and others by girls (Norvell, 1958; Peltola, 1965).

Age is a crucial factor affecting a child's response to literature. Eight years old seems to be a transitional age.

Prior to eight years of age, children enjoy folk tales from many cultures and fantasies written in the form and style of the folk tale: The Five Chinese Brothers, Millions of Cats, The King's Fountain, Many Moons, and the fairy tales of the master story-teller, Hans Christian Andersen. This is the time, in pre-school and the primary grades, to share these tales and those collected by the Brothers Grimm with children. At this period in a child's life folk and fairy tales seem to meet basic psychological and developmental needs (Bettelheim, 1976; Favat, 1971).

A study by a practicing psychoanalyst explored the relationship between story content and a child's psychological and developmental needs. Dr. L. E. Peller (1962) found in her work that a story one has heard early in life can be charged with such emotional intensity that a person may live his entire life under its spell. The reason for this profound effect is an interaction between child and tale, between a child's psychological needs, his fantasies, and the content of the story.

Dr. Peller listed a number of typical childhood fantasies and analyzed several stories built on each. In early childhood the fantasy of loss and return is expressed as a child losing his mother and, after dangerous adventures, is reunited with her: The Story about Ping, Peter Rabbit, and Curious George.

The fantasy of reversal of roles is common in folk literature with the youngest son performing heroic deeds and becoming the beloved and admired benefactor: Hop o' My Thumb, The King of the Golden River, the Biblical legend of Joseph and his brother,

and many of the tales from Grimm.

Dr. Peller analyzed in considerable detail stories she termed the Early Tale: Winnie the Pooh, The Story of Dr. Dolittle, the Mary Poppins books, and Wind in the Willows. The tales in this category must be of high literary quality. Only a master can write these stories or the plot will fall apart and no story worth the telling will remain.

These tales differ in plot, characters, and style. They appeal to different age groups, and they are far apart in literary quality. But in each story is a group of loyal friends and a Protector who can work magic. In the animal stories, there is usually one of a kind, and animals that in reality could never live together are intimates. No member of the circle is defined as young or old, as strongly male or female. The magician-protector's sex is given, but he or she is of an age or appearance where genital maleness or femaleness is of little consequence.

Frequently the characters wear animal masks. That is, the animals in the Early Tale are depicted with just enough authentic detail to screen the absence of missing age and sex. The animal mask supports the mechanism of denial.

These modern fairy stories interweave fantastic happenings with highly realistic and prosaic details which in a way deny the first denial. The tale is at home in both the world of magic and fantasy and in the world of sober, everyday reality. Problems of genital sexuality and the slow encroachment of death are eliminated. Yet, thanks to the writer's art, the sutures where these powerful

realities were cut out from the fabric of human life are invisible.

At the core of these stories, as with every successful story, is a universal daydream. In these Early Tales, it is a dream of denial. The young child wishes to deny sexuality, change, conflicting, competitive family relationships, and the inevitability of growing old. While he is involved in the events of the story, he can forget realities of which he is just becoming aware but is not yet ready to accept or able to understand. The dream of denial provides reassurance and a temporary haven for the child while he develops the maturity to cope with change, conflict, and death.

Books that create a warm and comfortable mood are also reassuring to the very young child. Margaret Wise Brown's Good Night, Moon, Janice Udry's The Moon Jumpers, and Robert McCloskey's Time of Wonder are good books for sharing with only one small child, perhaps while holding the child in one's lap. One advantage of a team-teaching situation is that it is possible for one teacher to give this kind of individual attention to a child who needs it while the other teacher works with a large group of children.

Books with animal characters appeal to very young children, and some of these are among the best read-aloud stories we have in the English language. Every English-speaking child has as part of his heritage the right to listen to his second or third grade teacher reading Beatrix Potter's tales, Kipling's Just So Stories, E. B. White's Charlotte's Web, Robert Lawson's Rabbit Hill, George Selden's The Cricket in Times Square, Munro Leaf's The Story of

Ferdinand, and Kenneth Grahame's The Wind in the Willows.

Very young children also enjoy realistic stories. Among the many realistic picture storybooks that are excellent for sharing with kindergarten children and first graders are Leo Politi's Juanita, Taro Yashima's Crow Boy, Charlotte Zolotow's William's Doll, Ezra Jack Keats's Goggles, and Tomie de Paola's Nana Upstaris and Nana Downstairs.

Ramona the Pest, Ramona the Brave, and other books of Beverly Cleary are excellent read-aloud realistic stories for somewhat older children as are Robert McCloskey's Homer Price and Lentil, Farley Mowat's Owls in the Family, Armstrong Sperry's Call It Courage, Meindert DeJong's Journey from Peppermint Street, and the works of Keith Robertson and Natalie Savage Carlson.

The third, fourth, and early fifth grades, the transitional period between the very young child's enjoyment of many types of literature and the older child's intense but often short-lived interest in one type of story, are crucial years of sharing literature. These are the years to take advantage of the child's lingering interest in imaginative literature by reading aloud fantasies that are beyond the young child's reading level but are of intrinsic interest to boys and girls of this age: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, The Borrowers, The Children of Green Knowe, The Twenty-One Balloons. Also, perhaps in the latter part of this transitional period, is an appropriate time to read aloud the "high fantasies," adventure stories that use the form and some of the motifs of medieval heroic legends and, like the

medieval tales, have as a theme the conflict between good and evil. Lloyd Alexander's Prydain books, C. S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia, J. R. R. Tolkien's The Hobbit, and Susan Cooper's The Grey King are all of high literary quality and are "action-packed," suspenseful stories. Many sixth and seventh grade boys, who could read these stories independently, reject the elements of fantasy and the mythological motifs, but boys in the fourth and early fifth grades will accept the fantastic elements in the stories and enjoy the action and suspense. Older girls are more accepting of fantasy and, if they are introduced to these stories when they are nine or ten years old, may read them on their own when they are older (Bard, Research in progress).

Although many children, especially boys, lose interest in fantasy by the time they are eleven years old, science fiction as a genre is highly acceptable to this age group. Robert Heinlein's Tunnel in the Sky, Ursula Le Guin's The Tombs of Atuan, Sylvia Engdahl's Enchantress from the Stars, Madeleine L'Engle's A Wrinkle in Time, Peter Dickinson's Heartsease, and the works of John Christopher are some examples of science fiction books that will appeal to fifth and sixth graders.

When selecting books to read aloud to the older children, we may forget those two classic romances, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Treasure Island. The long-familiar is sometimes overlooked as we seek out books that are considered current and relevant, but Tom is "everychild," and the lure of buried treasure and evil intrigue does not diminish with time. We also have the

types of romances currently in vogue: Gothic tales such as Joan Aiken's Wolves of Willoughby Chase and Patricia Clapp's Jane Emily, mysteries like the popular Encyclopedia Brown, tales of high adventure, and nature romances.

Realistic fiction has wide appeal for older children and meets their need to cope with the real world and real, sometimes overwhelming, problems. M. E. Kerr's Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack, S. E. Hinton's The Outsiders, Norma Klein's Mom, the Wolf Man, and Me, Frank Bonham's Durango Street, Jean George's Julie of the Wolves, Paul Zindel's The Pigman, and Scott O'Dell's Child of Fire are all contemporary stories dealing with problems many early adolescents face today. Since fifth and sixth grade children prefer stories with an adolescent protagonist to stories with a main character their own age, these stories are appropriate for ten and eleven year olds.

Both teacher observation and research studies confirm the importance of a child's age as a factor in appeal of literature, but the effect of intelligence on appeal is questionable (Norvell, 1958; Squire, 1964; Monson, 1968; Landau, 1956; Levinson, 1965). The research indicates that children of the same age will enjoy the same story despite considerable differences in I.Q. and reading ability. Therefore, the teacher can be quite safe in assuming that students in the same grade will like or dislike the same stories regardless of differences in intelligence. This is an obvious advantage in choosing stories for reading aloud.

The teacher must consider the factors within the literature

as well as the factors within the child when he selects literature for sharing with his students. The factors within the literature that may affect response are content, form, and literary quality.

Content is important and interacts with age. For all elementary school children, one might say, "The story's the thing," but children of different ages want different story content, as has already been discussed, and a different tone in telling the story. Younger children prefer a simple plot with a predictable, satisfying ending. Older children demand sustained dramatic action (Coleman, 1961; Norvell, 1958). Both age groups like humor (Monson, 1968; Norvell, 1958, 1973).

Most research studies on children's response to literature have concentrated on response to prose narrative. That poetry has received less attention from researchers may reflect the situation in the classroom and in American culture. As a society we are not that tuned in or turned on to poetry, but it may be that children and adolescents enjoy poetry more than adults have been aware (Larrick, 1971). One can generalize that teachers who enjoy poetry will find that their students also enjoy it (Norvell, 1973).

Children's response to information books has received little attention from researchers, but teachers and librarians have observed that boys, especially, read information books more than they read fiction. Teachers can encourage their students

to read information books by integrating these books, many of which are excellent both in content and format, into subject area studies. The school library has a wealth of materials to support the curriculum. Students disinterested in textbooks may become intrigued with well-written and beautifully illustrated books in social studies, science, health, music, art, and mathematics.

Form, then, does not in itself affect appeal of literature. Children like narrative prose, poetry, and expository writing.

Nor is literary quality a factor in children's enjoyment of literature. It is the content that is appealing regardless of the absence or presence of literary style or literary qualities acclaimed by adult critics (Norvell, 1973; Peltola, 1965).

Factors within the child and factors within the content of the literature affect a child's response to literature. So do factors within the environment: the teacher's own enjoyment of literature; the classroom situation; teaching methods; parental influence (Norvell, 1973; Chomsky, 1972).

Of these, one can hardly overestimate the importance of the teacher. It is the teacher who creates the classroom environment, and he has it within his power to create an environment conducive to the enjoyment of literature. A teacher who knows and enjoys literature has almost limitless means at hand to enhance his students' enjoyment of it.

Reading aloud may be the single most potent factor in influencing response to literature, but other methods are also

effective. The teacher can insure that his students have a variety of books accessible to them. He can arrange to have his class visit the school library at least once a week to select books for independent reading and plan at least one field trip a year to the public library. The teacher can assemble a small, regularly renewed classroom library by borrowing books from the school and public libraries, by sharing books he has accumulated, and by permitting his students to share their books. He can have his class participate in book clubs, and he can request lists of recommended books from the librarian.

The teacher can plan special activities to enhance his students' enjoyment of literature. He can schedule ETV programs such as "Cover-to-Cover" into the class schedule; show his class some of the filmed versions of picture books, folk tales, and poetry as well as original films like The Red Balloon, The Golden Fish, and Silent Waters; encourage his students to put on puppet shows, book skits, and creative dramatics; videotape these student presentations; have his students participate in book discussions and audiotape or videotape these discussions. The list is nearly endless and is limited only by the ingenuity and imagination of the teacher and his students.

Reading aloud, assuring the accessibility of literature to children, and planning interesting, creative activities based on their reading are excellent teaching methods for the elementary school teacher to use. The perceptive teacher of children under thirteen years of age will avoid teaching literature with the

objective in mind of achieving specific outcomes. Rather, he will let the literature speak for itself. He will respond to students' questions and encourage discussion if the children wish to discuss a story or poem, but he will not press the children to express their responses. Children comprehend literature on a literal level. They are not yet able to interpret or analyze theme, to infer meaning from the events of the story, or to understand symbolism (Flavell, 1963; Harms, 1973; Inhelder, 1958, 1966; Phillips, 1969; Rawan, 1975; Wohlwill, 1966). The elementary teacher, therefore, will not explicate the text or overwhelm the children with background information. Instead, he will make a wide variety of literature accessible to his students and share his own appreciation of books and reading with his class. In this way, a teacher may instill within his students a life-long enjoyment of literature.

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